

# The MYSTERY

Hidden for Ages

# Is Now REVEALED

*A Study of the Book of Colossians*

LESSON 14

This Week's Passage:

## Colossians 2:20–23

New International Version (NIV)

<sup>20</sup> Since you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world, why, as though you still belonged to the world, do you submit to its rules: <sup>21</sup> “Do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!”? <sup>22</sup> These rules, which have to do with things that are all destined to perish with use, are based on merely human commands and teachings. <sup>23</sup> Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.

## Memory Verse: Colossians 2:8

<sup>6</sup> So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, <sup>7</sup> rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.


<sup>8</sup> See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ.

## Day One: Read Colossians 2.

Earlier in Colossians 2, Paul warns the Colossians about “fine-sounding arguments” (v. 4) and worldly philosophies (v. 8) because he knows they can be appealing to the flesh.

1. What does he warn the Colossians about now? (v. 20)
2. Paul begins this passage by saying “Since you died with Christ....” Use the following questions to walk through Romans 6 and unpack the power and impact of this phrase.
  - a. Romans 6:3 says, “all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.” What happened as a result? (Rom. 6:6–7)
  - b. What is also true if “we died with Christ”? (Rom. 6:11)

This phrase in verse 20, “**elemental spiritual forces of this world**,” is difficult to translate. “Paul may have used the term...to refer to cosmic powers or to gods associated with stars, planets and the elements of the physical world. The pursuit of such powers seems to have been mixed with Jewish customs in the church, but the focus remained largely pagan....”<sup>1</sup>

- c. What is possible if you have died with Christ? (Rom. 6:12–18)
- v. 12
  - v. 13
  - v. 14
  - v. 18
- d. How can we who have “died with Christ” lead a life of holiness? (2 Cor. 7:1; 1 Thess. 5:23–24;  \* Rom. 6:19–22)

## Day Two: Read Colossians 2:20–23.

3. Given what you’ve learned in Romans 6, what point is Paul trying to make when he says, “you died with Christ to the elemental spiritual forces of this world?” (Review the bubble in day 1.)
4. After reminding the Colossians of the powerful reality of being united with Christ in his death, Paul seeks to show them the error of their ways.
- a. What are they submitting themselves to? (vv. 20b–21)
  - b. What are they hoping to accomplish by following such rules? (v. 23b)
  - c. What appeal might rule-keeping have for the Colossians? (v. 23a)

### Asceticism

The false teachers were imposing their own kind of religious asceticism, which is the practice of “strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline.”<sup>2</sup>

- d. Why are rules powerless to restrain sensual indulgence? (v. 22)

### **Day Three: Read Colossians 2:20–23.**


The life Paul describes in this section might seem like a “religious” life, with one seeking personal holiness through rule-keeping. But Paul exposes this lifestyle because he knows from experience that it only leads to slavery.

5. Read about Paul’s experience with rule-keeping in Philippians 3:4b–6. What radical change has taken place in Paul’s motivation and passion? (Phil. 3:3, 7–9)
6. Rule-keeping does not lead to holiness. Read the following quotation and highlight the parts that help you to understand true personal holiness.

[B]y virtue of our union with Jesus, we participate in the life of God: He dwells in us, and we dwell in him. As such, we can say that in Christ, God's holiness is our holiness. In Christ, we are already holy. Any and all subsequent notions of what it means to be holy must be predicated on this truth... God is asking of us [much more] than mere morality. As long as our notions of holiness are limited to doing certain things and not doing other things, we can go through our entire lives obeying the rules (or at least maintaining the appearance of doing so) without dealing with far more fundamental questions: Whose are we? To whom do we give our first love and loyalty?<sup>3</sup>

7. How are the answers to these questions—“Whose are we? To whom do we give our first love and loyalty?”—connected to holiness? (For help look at the following verses: 1 Cor. 6:19–20 and 1 Jn. 3:1–3.)

## Day Four: Read Colossians 2:20–23.

8. Perhaps you've incorporated rule-keeping, false humility, and harsh treatment of the body into your Christian experience.
  - a. If so, what are you seeking when you live this way? (Consider both your own experience and Rom. 10:2–3)
  - b. Why is living this way in opposition to the work of Jesus? (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 2:20–21;  Gal. 3:1–14)

## Day Five: Read Colossians 2.

9. What Paul describes in this week's passage is often just what the world understands the life of a Christian to be like: keeping a list of rules so that you can feel good about yourself and look down on others. Re-read Colossians 2 and write a statement that broadly captures what it really means to be a Christian. BEWARE: You may find yourself overflowing with joy and worship as you do this exercise!



Reminder: Remember to read the entire book of Colossians this week.

\* Indicates verses for further study

<sup>1</sup> *NIV Spirit of the Reformation Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 1932.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/asceticism>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/bible-answers/theology/what-does-god-mean-when-he-asks-us-to-be-holy.html?start=2>